你好 (Nǐ hǎo)!

My name is Nadine Mathys and I spent my fall semester in 2019 at Guanghua School of Management in China. As you are reading this, I assume you are in one of the two situations: either you consider applying for Guanghua School of Management or you are preparing for your semester abroad at Guanghua. For the indecisive, I will try to make the decision easier with this report. For the others, I will try to give a short guideline on preparation and share some of things you shouldn’t miss out when you are in Beijing.
Why China?

If I would be asked what I found most impressing about China, I would mention the contrast between tradition and modernity. The picture above summarizes my impressions from the four Chinese cities Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Xi’an and visualizes the contrast I am trying to describe.

For one semester, I plunged into a completely different country and culture – and I am very grateful for all the impressions I got. I recommend a semester in China to anyone who is genuinely interested in China, its people and culture. In the following, I will share some of my experiences, impressions and tips.

Note on the Chinese academic calendar: My semester in Beijing started in early September and ended by the end of December right before Christmas. However, since the start and end dates of the semester in China deviate from the academic calendar in Germany, I had to choose lectures with earlier exams for my previous semester in Munich. So, keep this in mind when planning your exchange semester.
**Pros and Cons for your Decision-making**

For those who consider applying for Guanghua, I want to share the pros and cons from my perspective. First, Guanghua School of Management is a department of Peking University (PKU), which is a huge public university focused on human sciences. The school has a very good reputation in China and is well known in Asia as well. Hence, having studied at Guanghua can be helpful for you if you consider working in China or Asia at a later point in your life. Studying at Guanghua also means being part of a big international community since the MBA program takes in about thirty exchange students from all over the world each semester. Also, thanks to the International Office at PKU, my whole exchange semester was well organized, and the school offered many trips for international students to see and experience Beijing and other Chinese cities. On the contrary, choosing Guanghua for your exchange semester entails a lot of work and commitment. The courses you can choose at Guanghua are part of the MBA electives and are intended for second-year MBA students. Hence, some of them require knowledge from previous Guanghua modules you have to catch up with and they can also be quite complex. In addition, most of them require a lot of homework for essays, group assignments, and presentations. You can also expect courses at Guanghua to be mostly either in the late afternoon or evening and on weekends, since most of your fellow MBA students will be working during the day. Lastly, you should keep in mind that skipping sessions is not allowed at Guanghua and missing more than two to three sessions ultimately leads to failing the module. All in all, I can highly recommend applying for Guanghua School of Management. However, bear in mind that choosing Guanghua can mean sacrificing some of your leisure time.

**Prepare for your Semester at Guanghua – Visa, Accommodation, Course Selection, Insurance, and Language Barrier**

You decided to apply for Guanghua School of Management and have been selected? Congratulations! Let me share some of my experience and tips on preparing your semester. Prior to your semester at Guanghua you should apply for a visa. A few months ahead of the official semester start, the international office in China will send you a document that you need to file your application for a student visa. When I applied for my visa, I went to the Chinese Visa Application Service Center in Munich, Laim. This is the officially appointed
organization in Germany that handles visa applications for China. There are several other service providers that offer to help you with your visa application. However, they only hand over your application to the Chinese Visa Application Service Center itself and charge an additional fee for checking for missing documents or mistakes. Hence, I recommend to hand in your application directly with the center to save some money. To apply, I had to leave my passport with the center and got it back with my visa about a week later.

Before you go to China, you should also sort out your accommodation. Most of the students in China live on campus since Chinese campuses are generally a lot bigger than German university campuses. Also, you can find anything you need on the PKU campus – many different canteens, cafes, a gym, a small park, a stationary store, and even a small grocery store. However, only local students are eligible to live in the accommodations on campus. For international students, there is just a small chance to get a room in the Global Village, which is a dormitory near the campus that is open for international students. The rooms are shared with another international student and have shared (Western) toilets on each floor along with showers and washing machines. However, it is not easy to get into Global Village. You can apply online a few weeks before your semester starts. Applications open around midnight and there are very few rooms which are usually taken within just a few seconds. I heard it takes quite a lot of luck to get a bed in Global Village and in fact, I did not meet anyone who managed to get a room in the dormitory. Hence, the international office recommends international students to find an off-campus accommodation. Within their welcome pack, PKU will send you recommendations on agencies that help you to find a room or apartment near the school. The cost can range from about 700 EUR for a very simple room in a shared flat to about 1000 EUR for a small apartment for yourself. Hence, I recommend you compare some options before you choose. The good thing about finding an accommodation in China is that it is usual to rent a room or flat just 2-3 weeks before the move-in date and there are a lot of rooms and flats on the market, so you don’t have to feel pressured to find a place months ahead of your stay.

A few weeks prior to your semester start, you will have to register for courses online. At Guanghua, the course selection system works like a lottery. You will have to bid points for the courses you are interested in. Subsequently, the students that bid the most points will get a course. With 5 courses (6 courses would be equivalent to a full 30 credit semester in Germany), my schedule was already quite tight, and I had to drop one course because I could
not keep up with the assignments during the semester. Hence, I recommend you either take less courses in China than you would take in Munich or sacrifice some of your leisure time. In terms of grading, most of my courses were graded based on group working assignments and presentations. For 3 of my courses, the grades were solely based on all group assignments during the semester whereas for the other two, I had to take an additional exam at the end. Additionally, attendance and participation determine the grading of all courses at Guanghua. 
I would like to recommend courses at Guanghua but most elective courses are changed from semester to semester. However, I can highly recommend the course “Managing the MNCs in China” (in case it is still being offered) which will teach you a lot about doing business in China and the Chinese business culture. Additionally, “Entrepreneurship in China” teaches you a lot about China’s startup ecosystem through various guest lectures by local entrepreneurs and is highly recommendable. 
Before you fly to China, you should also sort out your medical / accident insurance. Once you arrive in China, PKU will require you to buy a compulsory Chinese insurance for about 50 EUR. However, the documents are all in Chinese and I never knew what the insurance actually covers. Especially in case of a severe medical incident or accident, it might be necessary to arrange a transport for you back to Germany which can be highly expensive and might not be covered by the Chinese insurer. Hence, I recommend you buy a medical and accident insurance for traveling before you depart. I got mine from HanseMerkur for about 200 EUR for the whole semester and was very happy I had it because I had to visit the hospital during my stay and the Chinese provider had some complicated refund policies and caps that I did not fully understand whereas HanseMerkur reimbursed within a few weeks. 
Lastly, I recommend you learn a little bit of Chinese and install an offline translation app before you depart to China. Note that the Google Play Store won’t work when you arrive so you should download all (Western) apps you might need. The vast majority of Chinese (off campus) do not speak English at all so if you plan to explore the city, be prepared to face communication issues. Before you go, you could learn some basic words and expressions to get along on your own. Also, you should always have your residential address written in Chinese characters with you. As a translation app with an offline dictionary I can recommend pleco. I highly recommend to also purchase the premium version of pleco, which includes a feature for Chinese character recognition and translation by camera.
For spoken conversations, I recommend Google translate, which worked pretty well for me. However, bear in mind, that all Google services and most of the Western websites cannot be accessed from China without a VPN.

**Tipps for your Stay in China – WeChat, Transport, Food, Air Quality, and Things to see**

WeChat is the Chinese version of WhatsApp (WhatsApp itself is blocked in China). Even though the UI looks quite boring in comparison to WhatsApp, the company built an impressively huge ecosystem around WeChat. For instance, you would not only use WeChat to chat with your friends, receive updates from your university, study groups and other student associations but also pay through WeChat at any single occasion you can think of. In fact, I did not even leave my house with my wallet but only with my phone and a power bank during my semester because cash was simply not necessary. Also, you can rent a bike, request a doctor’s appointment or order your Luckin coffee (Chinese Starbucks) directly through the app – just to mention a few of WeChat’s powerful features. Some stores like Luckin coffee actually don’t even take orders that are not made through the app so having a WeChat account is highly recommended in China.

The public transport system works very well in Beijing. There is a huge, highly reliable metro system and buses. A trip costs approximately 1 EUR, depending on the distance you travel. I recommend the local (Chinese) app Baidu for navigation as Google maps in blocked in China.

For shorter distances, you can hail a taxi with the Didi app (Chinese Uber) for about 2-10 EUR. For the last mile you can also find plenty of bikes to rent all over China’s streets which cost you only 25-50 cent per ride. Chinese food is generally quite different from Western food. Especially in Beijing, food is a lot oilier and spicier than in Germany. Also, it is very different from the Chinese food you can get in Germany. For me it was quite difficult to adapt to the local cuisine, so I found some Western restaurants I ordered from regularly. In fact, cooking is not very usual in China and most people would eat out or
order food. You can easily order through apps such as Elema and one meal costs about 5-10 EUR. Alternatively, the canteens on campus serve a variety of local Chinese food and there are two (more expensive) Western bistro as well.

As you may have heard already, the air quality in China can be quite bad. It is measured by the AQI (Air Quality Index) for air pollution, which you can monitor in real-time online. Generally, the air quality is better in the night and early mornings and worsens during the day as traffic increases. While in Munich, we have an AQI of about 10-20 on average, it can easily reach up to 200 or 300 in China (February 2019 had an average AQI of 152 for instance). Starting from about 80, you can see a slight decrease in visibility. Above 150, it is highly recommended to wear a mask to protect your lounges and prevent a sore throat and above 200, you can sometimes smell the air pollution. Therefore, the majority of Chinese as well as the foreigners usually go out with a mask. This is very common in China in contrast to Europe and you do not have to feel uncomfortable wearing a mask in public. Before I went to China, I ordered a high-quality mask of the brand RESPRO with replaceable filters from the UK for about 150 EUR. They promise a tighter fit and seal a lot better than the regular cheap masks you can get in Chinese supermarkets – and on top of that they look a bit fancier than the cheap ones. Alternatively, you can get the cheap masks at most of the Chinese convenience stores.

There are plenty of things to see in and around Beijing. You can see famous sights – e.g. the Tiananmen square, the Forbidden City, plenty of temples, the Olympic Stadium, or the Summer Palace. You can also book a trip with a travel company for about 10 to 20 EUR to explore places or nature spots nearby Beijing. For this, I recommend CET trip. It is one of the best and cheapest travel organizations on the market that targets foreign students. Also, it is led by fellow PKU students and aims to connect foreigners in China. They take you to different sections of the Great Wall (by the way, there is a Chinese saying, that you are not a real man/women if you haven’t been to the Great Wall at least once in your life), hot springs, hiking places in the hills or even (small) skiing resorts. However, when planning trips into the parks and nature in and around Beijing, I recommend you first check the air quality forecast before signing up for sports activities to avoid negative surprises. If your schedule allows you to explore other cities, you can also easily travel across China by train or take a flight. Train rides and plane tickets are quite cheap and cost around 100 EUR per trip. I also recommend taking the Chinese night trains as they are a very comfortable traveling option. During my
time in China, I had the chance to see two cities: the modern Shanghai and the more traditional but still huge city Xi’an. I can also recommend joining some of the trips offered by PKU’s International Office. They organize plenty of trips in the beginning of the semester such as a traditional tea house visit, a KTV and hot pot evening or a week in Chengdu. The office will give you the chance to register a few weeks before your semester start and you will have to pay on the registration day. However, I recommend you check the latest schedule of your courses before you pay as there might be last minute changes. In my case, my course schedule had been updated and the start week was changed from week 1 to week 0 and as a result, I had to cancel my trip to Chengdu. As an insider tip I recommend visiting Gubei Watertown near Beijing which is a replica of Southern China’s traditional water towns right next to the great wall. You can hike up to the wall, explore the beautiful water town and see the enlightened great wall at night.

**How to connect with the local Chinese**

It might take some effort and time to connect with Chinese. You can expect to meet a few Chinese students in your classes but the classes I chose consisted mostly of foreign students. Hence, I recommend joining student associations or their WeChat groups to stay up to date with their local event schedule where you can easily meet Chinese. For instance, I met many Chinese from PKU during a casual Halloween party organized by the international Student Association. Also, I found a language partner to practice Chinese/German, who became a very good friend of mine. Further, sports clubs can help you connect with locals. However, in my case the registration opened quite late – about two months after the semester started. Even though it might require some effort, I highly recommend connecting with the local Chinese as this is the best way to get to know and understand the local culture. Additionally, from my experience, Chinese are extremely friendly and helpful, very open to getting to know foreigners and curious about other cultures. So, it won’t be hard to make friends with the local Chinese, you just need to find them before you can break the ice with a hot pot or KTV session.